UN

UNITED
NATIONS

A

General Assembly

Distr.
GENERAL

A/AC.96/SR.523
4 November 1997

ENGLISH
Original: FRENCH

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE PROGRAMME OF THE UNITED NATIONS
HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Forty-eighth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 523rd MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Thursday, 16 October 1997, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. SKOGMO (Norway)

CONTENTS

ANNUAL THEME: REPATRIATION CHALLENGES (continued)

CONSIDERATION AND ADOPTION OF PROGRAMME BUDGETS

REPORTS RELATING TO PROGRAMME OVERSIGHT

MEETINGS OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE IN 1998

CONSIDERATION OF THE PROVISIONAL AGENDA OF THE FORTY-NINTH SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

This record is subject to correction.

Corrections should be submitted in one of the working languages. They should be set forth in a memorandum and also incorporated in a copy of the record. They should be sent within one week of the date of this document to the Official Records Editing Section, room E.4108, Palais des Nations, Geneva.

Any corrections to the records of the meetings of the Executive Committee will be consolidated in a single corrigendum, to be issued shortly after the end of the session.

GE.97-03222 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 3.15 p.m.

ANNUAL THEME: REPATRIATION CHALLENGES (agenda item 4) (continued) (A/AC.96/887)

1. Mrs. von BECKH WIDMANSTETTER (Argentina) said that the main repatriation challenge was that there were so many factors to be taken into consideration. First of all, it was primarily the responsibility of countries of origin to eliminate the economic, political, racial and other causes of population displacements. In order to achieve a genuine durable solution, it would then be necessary to put an end to violations of human rights and the rights of minorities, eliminate poverty, halt environmental degradation and settle ethnic conflicts. Clearly, no organization was capable of carrying out such a task on its own. The assistance of the States concerned and the political and economic support of the international community had to be obtained as part of a coordinated plan involving all interested parties, in other words, both humanitarian organizations and development agencies.

2. Her delegation welcomed the attention the High Commissioner had given to the request for assistance made by the Government of Colombia in connection with a problem of internal population displacement that could spill over into neighbouring countries. Argentina was convinced that comprehensive and coordinated action by United Nations agencies, other international organizations and NGOs would make it possible to offer a comprehensive solution to that complex and daunting problem. It was prepared to help solve the problem through regional cooperation.

3. Argentina paid tribute to UNHCR and its staff, whose assistance had enabled it to charter a military aircraft to transport relief and food supplies to Rwanda. It was devoted to the humanitarian cause and, as a tangible contribution to the work of UNHCR, had offered it the building in which its regional office was located in Buenos Aires. She called on UNHCR to strengthen the dialogue with other international actors, including volunteers, to ensure the coordination of worldwide activities on behalf of refugees.

CONSIDERATION AND ADOPTION OF PROGRAMME BUDGETS (agenda item 6) (A/AC.96/884 and Add.1 to 4; A/AC.96/894)

4. The CHAIRMAN invited Mr. Walzer, Deputy High Commissioner, to introduce agenda item 6.

5. Mr. WALZER (Deputy High Commissioner) said that the High Commissioner was submitting the revised 1997 General Programmes budget, which remained unchanged at US$ 452,612,000, to the Executive Committee for its endorsement. Taking account of Special Programmes, overall budgetary estimates for 1997 under all sources of funds were US$ 1,214,400,000, as against US$ 1,169,200,000 in 1996. Projections for 1998 General Programmes were US$ 440 million and US$ 555,900,000 for Special Programmes, so that, for the first time in six years, the budget should remain below US$ 1 billion.

6. The High Commissioner shared the disappointment expressed by a number of delegations about the reduction in the level of General Programmes, even though it had been widely suggested that they should account for a larger

share of the core activities. Although UNHCR had succeeded in containing and actually reducing budgetary requirements, funding remained a major preoccupation. While greatly appreciating the contributions announced by several Member States during the current session, the High Commissioner renewed her appeal for early pledges so as not to risk a rupture in activities, with severe consequences for those who depended on the generosity of Member States.

7. For 1998, UNHCR foresaw even greater difficulties in securing full and timely funding of both General and Special Programmes. Carry-overs from one year to the next were much lower than in the past and UNHCR's ability to implement the programmes endorsed by the Committee would to a large extent depend on the results of the forthcoming annual Pledging Conference to be held in New York.

8. Under Project Delphi, UNHCR was to review and focus its priorities and promote them through more effective coordination between the various actors and more active participation across the institution. In that respect, it reaffirmed its determination to improve staff-management relations through dialogue, an objective and constructive approach and mutual respect.

9. Turning to agenda item 7, he announced that the accounts had been certified by the external auditors and that progress had been made in the implementation of their recommendations. UNHCR had taken a number of important steps to strengthen its oversight capacity, including, in particular, the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with the United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services in New York. However, the High Commissioner recognized that, despite the improvements made, efforts had to continue in that direction.

10. Mr. EFBLOM (Finland), speaking on behalf of the Nordic countries, said that they shared the High Commissioner's concern about the funding projections, in particular with regard to the General Programmes for the current year and for 1998. In view of UNHCR's heavy reliance on voluntary funding, donors were encouraged to respond generously to its appeals. A continuing decline in contribution levels would undoubtedly have serious implications for UNHCR's capacity to assist refugees, particularly since the unpredictability of humanitarian emergencies and political upheavals had become the rule rather than the exception. Against such a background of financial constraints, the Nordic countries advocated prioritizing the scarce resources available and welcomed the efforts made, inter alia, in connection with Project Delphi.

11. Flexibility was also important. In that connection, the Nordic countries endorsed the proposal the United States had made in the Standing Committee on the possibility of transferring certain Special Programmes to the General Programmes budget. Flexibility also required the downsizing of operations in areas where certain tasks could be assumed by other competent organizations and where UNHCR's continued presence was not an absolute necessity. In contrast, its presence could be strengthened in other areas where large-scale repatriation projects were on hold pending an improvement in local circumstances. That approach was less costly than total withdrawal, followed by redeployment at a later stage.

12. Fund-raising and good budgeting practices required the clear determination of objectives. The Nordic countries had noted with concern the observations made by the Board of Auditors about weaknesses in programme management and agreed on the need for clear regional strategies accompanied by situation- and/or country-specific programme goals and operational objectives. Transparency was also a key element in securing funding. ACABQ had recommended the review of criteria for classifying UNHCR expenditure, taking into account the work already done by UNFPA, UNDP and UNICEF on the harmonization of budget presentation. From a donor perspective, it was useful to be able to compare the cost structures of the various humanitarian organizations, while taking into account their individual differences.

13. The work of ACABQ, the Board of External Auditors and the Office of Internal Oversight Services was valuable both for UNHCR and for its Member States in monitoring the use of funds and the efficiency of programme implementation. The Nordic countries trusted that due consideration would be given to those bodies' comments and recommendations. They expressed their deep admiration and appreciation for the work done by UNHCR, whose staff worked devotedly under extremely trying and dangerous conditions.

14. Mr. MORAND (Switzerland), referring to humanitarian coordination, stressed the importance of drawing on the comparative advantages of each humanitarian actor involved, accompanying the implementation of the Secretary-General's reforms with optimal task-sharing among the various United Nations centres and establishing optimum cooperation between all humanitarian agents in order to ensure proactive coordination rather than simply trying to limit potential damage.

15. Social and economic reintegration on return was the responsibility of a great many actors. UNHCR therefore had a specific role to play, as did other actors. In some cases, it worked in isolation, and that could lead to delays or mistakes. Early and joint planning of social and economic reintegration operations by all actors, particularly those involved in development, was necessary to ensure programme durability.

16. As far as resource allocation and use were concerned, his delegation had noted that, in 1996, 69 per cent of the funds allocated to implementing partners had been assigned to national and international NGOs (70 per cent of which had been committed under project agreements with international NGOs, i.e. from the North). It had also noted with satisfaction the comments by the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions in its report (A/AC.96/884/Add.3) recommending that the accounts of each implementing partner should be regularly audited by an independent audit authority. It also welcomed ACABQ's view that government partners should be treated as normal implementing partners, on the same basis as NGOs, whenever UNHCR entrusted them with a task involving resources donated by Member States.

17. With regard to the use of resources, his delegation took note of a projected decline in the level of expenditure under the General Programmes. In addition, the provisional needs estimate for the Special Programmes in 1998 indicated a considerable reduction. That positive feature should not, however, be seen as paving the way for activities which UNHCR would like to undertake, but which were not within the strict scope of its mandate.

18. The international community should learn lessons from the humanitarian action carried out in connection with the crisis in the Great Lakes region in order suitably to support UNHCR's humanitarian activities. It must be ensured that UNHCR did not again find itself isolated and misunderstood in the midst of a crisis, when the nature of its mandate required it to intervene. His delegation reiterated its support for UNHCR in implementing its overall programme activities for 1998.

REPORTS RELATING TO PROGRAMME OVERSIGHT (agenda item 7) (A/AC.96/883, 884, 885 and Add.1 and 886)

19. Mr. AMUNATEGUI (Director, Inspection and Evaluation Service) said that two projects were under way in connection with evaluation activities. The purpose of the first one, conducted jointly with WFP and UNICEF, was to learn lessons from the operational coordination between those organizations at the regional and local levels during the Great Lakes operation from October 1996 to August 1997. The second project, to be carried out jointly with WFP in Bosnia and Herzegovina, would begin shortly. In addition, the preparation of the inspection procedures handbook had been completed and its second edition had just been distributed. The members of the Senior Management Committee had also received two notes from the Inspector on the generic lessons learned from the most recent inspection missions, particularly on programme and administration issues. The Committee had met for the third time in 1997, in the presence of a representative, from outside UNHCR, of the Office of Internal Oversight Services in New York.

20. He thanked the Government of Switzerland for having organized a seminar, in the framework of the Geneva group composed of the major contributors to the United Nations, on the auditing of accounts and monitoring within United Nations agencies. In addition to the members of the Geneva group, representatives of United Nations administrative departments and internal oversight services had been invited, together with representatives of external departments such as the auditors and the Inspectors of the Joint Inspection Unit. Representatives of the corresponding departments of Governments and private bodies had also taken part. That well-organized seminar had provided an opportunity for a very interesting debate relating, in particular, to the responsibilities of administrations which were primarily responsible for monitoring, before even specialized departments themselves. Attention had also focused on relations between the various oversight departments and Member States, which should engage in a closer dialogue and show greater understanding. It had been seen that internal and external oversight methods could differ depending on those involved, but, above all, much had been learned from the experience of the other organizations and a better understanding gained of the expectations of the Member States of the United Nations in respect of oversight. Other seminars of that kind should be organized in future.

21. Mr. MACDONALD (Australia) said that the Australian Government welcomed UNHCR's commitment to openness and transparency in its financial and programme planning procedures. It welcomed both the report of the Board of Auditors (A/AC.96/885) and UNHCR's response to the report. The report had identified a number of shortcomings in UNHCR's practices, attributable, in particular, to the lack of definition and quantification of project objectives, the absence

of appropriate performance indicators and delays in implementing partners providing audit certificates and monitoring and financial reports. The difficult environment in which UNHCR worked should not affect accountability and effective programme design and implementation. In order better to select its implementing partners, UNHCR could consider instituting a system of prior accreditation of implementing agencies as a means of forming a pool of effective implementing partners.

22. His delegation was concerned that the five recommendations from previous audit reports had still not been fully implemented by UNHCR. It endorsed the draft recommendations calling on UNHCR to report regularly to the next Standing Committee meetings on progress in responding to the recommendations. It viewed UNHCR's programme of evaluation and inspections favourably, but drew attention to the obvious, but nonetheless essential, link between proper project design and effective monitoring and evaluation. Australia was currently assessing the evaluation capacities of a number of multilateral agencies, including UNHCR. It hoped that the assessment would help it not only to examine the various evaluation methods adopted by multilateral agencies, but also to tap into the substantial resources and experience they had gained in delivering relief and development assistance.

23. Mr. BRUN (Denmark) said that one of the previous recommendations that had not fully been implemented, according to the report of the Board of Auditors (A/AC.96/885), related to the need to assess the capabilities of implementing partners to implement major projects. That issue was also raised in the report of ACABQ (A/AC.96/884/Add.3), which stressed that it was of particular importance for UNHCR fully to assess the capacity of implementing partners before concluding an agreement with them. His delegation fully agreed with that statement and urged that further efforts should be made to develop a framework for assessing the capacity of implementing partners with regard to implementation, as well as accounting and auditing.

24. In connection with the use of consultants, which was also dealt with in the report of the Board of Auditors, the nature of UNHCR's work undoubtedly often required the identification and hiring of consultants under time constraints. Quality and transparency should be the guiding principles in setting up procedures for identifying, selecting and hiring consultants. The establishment of terms of reference defining specific targets and delivery dates against which consultants' work could be measured should be the rule, as should the evaluation of each job done.

25. Referring to the report on UNHCR inspection and evaluation activities (A/AC.96/886), his delegation fully agreed with the line of action taken by UNHCR in the field of inspection activities. When it came to evaluation, however, his delegation felt that there was still ground to be covered. Evaluations should be a natural part of the project cycle. Accordingly, they should be planned right from the start of each operation and benchmarks should be built into projects. In order to assess the information provided in the report on current or completed evaluations, an overview of evaluations planned or under consideration for 1998 would have been most welcome. His delegation would very much like to see an evaluation of the implementation of the policy on refugee women and of the Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women. Such an evaluation might well reveal the need for the revision of those two

documents, which dated back to 1990 and 1991, respectively. His delegation hoped that, in future, UNHCR would share the results of evaluations with its partners, governmental as well as non-governmental. Evaluations were fundamental to the capacity-building of an organization. UNHCR, with its numerous operations and partners, was in a unique position to build a best-practices knowledge bank which all humanitarian actors could share.

26. Mr. GANDARA GABORIT (Observer for Guatemala) said that UNHCR should be commended on the way in which it used its resources. They had to be used transparently. The Government of Guatemala had found that, as far as UNHCR projects implemented in Guatemala were concerned, auditors were regularly sent on missions to carry out the required audits on the spot. In order further to improve respect for the principle of accountability, auditors should be sent more rapidly.

27. Mr. FAKHOURI (Controller) said that there seemed to be some support among the members of the Executive Committee for the strategy outlined on the question of audit certificates, which had been the subject of earlier discussions. With regard to the choice of implementing partners, a questionnaire had been sent to all of UNHCR's implementing partners requesting them to provide information on their activities, as well as financial data that would make it possible to assess their capacity to implement UNHCR programmes. The replies to the questionnaire would make it possible to set up a database in order to meet the concern just expressed by the Danish delegation. As to the question of consultants, UNHCR acknowledged that it should try to clarify the requirements for hiring them and intended to do so in the coming months.

28. Mr. AMUNATEGUI (Director, Inspection and Evaluation Service) said that UNHCR was aware of the need to integrate evaluations into project cycles and was working in close cooperation with a team that was responsible for setting up the Integrated Management Information System, which would take account of the principles of self-assessment and the incorporation of benchmarks. UNHCR had been unable to submit the evaluation programme for 1998 because it had not yet been defined, but it had certainly taken note of the question of refugee women. He pointed out that, since 1995, UNHCR had been trying to improve the communication of the results of evaluation studies particularly by preparing consolidated reports, which it hoped to be able to submit in greater numbers in future.

29. The CHAIRMAN suggested that a decision on draft decision DC/CN.6 should be postponed until the consideration of the report of the Executive Committee. He nevertheless took it that the Executive Committee was already prepared to adopt the target of US$ 440 million set for the General Programme budget in subparagraph (d) of the draft decision.

30. If there were no objections, he would take it that the Executive Committee adopted the 1998 General Programmes budget.

31. It was so decided.

MEETINGS OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE IN 1998 (agenda item 8)

32. The CHAIRMAN said that, if there were no objections, he would take it that the Executive Committee postponed its decision on draft decisions DC/CN.7 and DC/CN.8 until the consideration of its report.

33. It was so decided.

34. Mr. HALL (Secretary of the Executive Committee) said that Costa Rica, Guatemala, Guinea and the Niger should be added to the list of candidacies in subparagraph (a) of draft decision DC/CN.8.

CONSIDERATION OF THE PROVISIONAL AGENDA OF THE FORTY-NINTH SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE (agenda item 9)

35. The CHAIRMAN said that, if there were no objections, he would take it that the Executive Committee postponed its decision on draft decision DC/CN.9 until the adoption of its report.

36. It was so decided.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS (agenda item 10)

Statement by the Chairman of the Staff Council

37. Mr. ISHAK (Chairman of the Staff Council) said that the protection and voluntary repatriation of refugees had been severely tested. In an unstable and volatile period, particularly in the political sphere, the commitment and dedication of UNHCR's staff had been decisive to its operational viability. UNHCR staff, both at headquarters and in the field, deserved the international community's recognition and support.

38. The Staff Council appreciated the possibility offered to it at each session to address the Executive Committee and to convey its views to it directly. At a time when major initiatives for change were being taken by management, it was vital for UNHCR's governing body to keep a watchful eye on developments and to lend an attentive ear to staff representatives. The Council emphasized that the continuation of Project Delphi was an obstacle to the introduction of the necessary changes. The staff was certainly aware of the concerns of donors over rising overheads, but could not see how efficiency could be improved by arbitrary staff cuts. Moreover, despite the elimination of some 100 posts at headquarters, overheads had risen to unprecedented levels in 1997.

39. The number of UNHCR's staff members had increased enormously since the beginning of the 1990s, rising from fewer than 2,000 to more than 6,000 in 1997. The organization had 250 offices in 120 countries and intervened in situations that were completely new to it. The growth reflected the need for UNHCR to respond to contemporary challenges and to assume new responsibilities. Staff numbers were adjusted each year on the basis of UNHCR's operational requirements, a need that was fully understood by staff. However, staff cuts had never been implemented in a manner so damaging to staff morale as under Project Delphi. There was no denying that the staff were disappointed that the situation had been allowed to reach that stage.

40. The staff was not opposed to change and was prepared to accept difficult decisions. However, it expected to be included in consultations and treated in conformity with the principles of the United Nations. It was disappointed that the cooperation it had shown had been used to undermine job security within the organization.

41. UNHCR's governing body had an obligation to ensure that the right of the staff to organize and to defend itself was properly exercised within the Office. Although the Staff Council was elected by all staff members, its task in representing staff was made extremely difficult by the absence of a proper system or formal framework for consultation between staff and management. The Staff Council was excluded from the decision-making process and merely informed of decisions once they had been taken.

42. Turning to staff concerns, he said that, although locally recruited staff accounted for 60 per cent of UNHCR's staff, they were the most disadvantaged when it came to career development. However, that grave injustice was secondary when set against their security dilemmas. Contrary to the provisions of the United Nations Field Security Handbook, local staff in Zaire and in other countries had not been involved in the planning, preparation and implementation of security arrangements. They had deplored the lack of information and had unanimously condemned UNHCR's failure to protect its own staff. The time had come for an in-depth review of the legal status of local staff in the context of evacuation and the assistance of the Executive Committee on that question would be valuable.

43. With regard to general service staff at headquarters, their thorough knowledge of the Office's functioning had not been drawn on under Project Delphi. They deplored the absence of transparency, which was illustrated by the fact that management had been unable to inform them of the basis for its decision to cut up to 250 posts at headquarters.

44. As far as staff in the professional category were concerned, a discreet distinction seemed to be made between two subgroups of international staff, depending on whether the staff rules applied to them or not. The Staff Council was gravely concerned by the reports that the recommendations made by the appointments and promotions bodies had been disregarded, in total breach of the rules of transparency and integrity. Moreover, while a relatively large number of international staff remained unassigned, external recruitment was continuing. Such apparent disregard for cost-effectiveness was disturbing, particularly since most violations of established rules were apparently committed by senior staff in UNHCR.

45. On a positive note, the management had recognized that the existing consultative machinery was inappropriate and that UNHCR suffered from problems manifestly related to the lack of proper consultation. Measures were being taken to make good that shortcoming and it was to be hoped that evidence that they had borne fruit would be presented to the next session of the Executive Committee. For its part, UNHCR's staff pledged to cooperate fully with the High Commissioner in carrying out the responsibilities entrusted to her by the Executive Committee.

The meeting rose at 4.40 p.m.